

## Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1038

EXDIS

JERUSALEM FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY ATHERTON

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: OVIP EGIS JO SY  
SUBJECT: VISIT TO DAMASCUS OF MIDDLE EAST STUDY MISSION

REF: STATE 11243

SUMMARY: SUCCESSFUL FOUR-DAY VISIT OF MIDDLE EAST STUDY MISSION TO SYRIA HIGHLIGHTED BY MEETINGS WITH PROMINENT RELIGIOUS LEADERS, FOREIGN MINISTRY AND PLO, AND EXTENSIVE CONTACTS WITH SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY. OUR UNDERSTANDING IS THAT MISSION CAME AWAY WITH IMPRESSION THAT LIFE IS EASIER FOR SYRIAN JEWS, THAT SARG ATTITUDE IS EVOLVING IN FAVORABLE DIRECTION, BUT THAT THEIR TREATMENT IS NOT YET FULLY ON PAR WITH OTHER SYRIANS. GRUEN AWARE GROUP MAY BE SUBJECT INTENSE QUESTIONING IN ISRAEL OVER CONDITION OF JEWISH COMMUNITY AND ITS CONTACT WITH PLO REPS HERE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE JOINTLY SPONSORED MIDDLE EAST STUDY MISSION OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE VISITED DAMASCUS FEBRUARY 9-13. EXTENSIVE ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE FOR VISIT THROUGH AN ACTIVE LOCAL TOURIST AGENCY WORKING WITH MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIAL

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MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THROUGH EMBASSY/FOREIGN MINISTRY CHANNELS. MISSION WAS ACCORDED A GROUP VISA AT AIRPORT. INDIVIDUAL PASSPORTS WERE NOT EXAMINED OR STAMPED.

2. SUBSTANTIVE MEETINGS DURING VISIT TOOK PLACE WITH GREEK ORTHODOX AND GREEK CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS, DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY

PROFESSORS, FOREIGN MINISTRY DIRECTOR OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS, PLO, AND GRAND MUFTI. BRIEFLY, GROUP FOUND THAT UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS REFUSED TO BE DRAWN OUT ON POLITICAL SUBJECTS. GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCH WAS MOST CRITICAL OF US, HITTING PARTICULARLY POSSIBILITY THAT US MIGHT SELL "MIND ALTERING" (SIC) BOMBS TO ISRAEL. GRAND MUFTI MESSAGE WAS FULL OF WARNINGS CONCERNING COMMUNIST INFLUENCE IN ARAB WORLD BUT HE ALSO STRESSED DESIRE FOR PEACE AND FRATERNITY AMONG MAJOR RELIGIONS. EMBASSY ARRANGED MEETING WAS FIRST SO FAR AS WE AWARE THAT ANY VISITING GROUP HAS HAD WITH GRAND MUFTI.

3. FOREIGN MINISTRY DIRECTOR FOR AMERICAN AFFAIRS SHOEFI DEFTLY HANDLED A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS DEALING WITH SYRIA'S CONDITIONS FOR SUCH A SETTLEMENT. MAIN POINTS SHOEFI MADE WERE THAT:

A. SYRIA READY TO ACCEPT ISRAEL IN RETURN FOR A JUST SETTLEMENT.

B. PALESTINIANS CANNOT RECOGNIZE ISRAEL BEFORE NEGOTIATIONS BEGIN BECAUSE THIS IS THE ONLY IMPORTANT CARD WHICH THEY HOLD; BUT THE PALESTINIANS HAVE INDICATED THEIR WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE BEYOND WHAT IS CONTAINED IN THEIR NATIONAL CHARTER.

C. THE BORDERS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE PRE-1967 LINE CAN BE READJUSTED TO ALLOW FOR ANOMALIES THAT EXIST BUT THE SYRIANS REJECT ANY ANNEXATION OF TERRITORY IN A PEACE  
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SETTLEMENT.

D. ESTABLISHMENT OF FULL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS, TRADE, TOURISM, ETC. WITH ISRAEL COULD ONLY COME GRADUALLY AFTER A SETTLEMENT.

4. PLO REPRESENTATIVE KHATIB DID NOT INDICATE THAT ANY MAJOR CHANGES WERE CONTEMPLATED IN THE PRESENT PLO CHARTER BUT STATED THAT PALESTINIANS WOULD ACCEPT TRUNCATED STATE IF QUESTIONS SUCH AS RIGHT OF RETURN OF REFUGEES, RECOGNITION OF THEIR NATIONAL RIGHTS, ETC. WERE MET. GROUP CONSIDERED HIS OVERALL PRESENTATION "VERY MODERATE."

5. AMBASSADOR AND MRS. MURPHY RECEIVED DELEGATION FOR TWO HOUR COFFEE/BRIEFING FEBRUARY 11. CO-CHAIRMAN GRUEN OF AJC SAID HE WISHED EXPRESS SPECIAL APPRECIATION TO AMBASSADOR FOR HIS AND EMBASSY'S WORK OVER LAST TWO AND ONE-HALF YEARS ON BEHALF OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN SYRIA "WITHIN BOUNDS WHICH DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL ALLOWED."

6. GROUP HAD EXTENSIVE CONTACTS WITH SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY BEGINNING WITH COURTESY CALL PAID BY COMMUNITY LEADER TOTAH ON GROUP

MEMBERS AT SEMIRAMIS HOTEL. (COMMENT: FACT TOTAH TOOK INITIATIVE TO CALL IN ITS SELF REMARKABLE.) AMBASSADOR MET WITH GRUEN AND GOLDRICH EVEING FEBRUARY 10 AND AGAIN WITH GRUEN EVENING FEBRUARY 12 FOR COMPREHENSIVE DISCUSSIONS OF LATEST SYRIAN MEASURES REGARDING COMMUNITY. MANY MEMBERS OF GROUP ATTENDED JEWISH SERVICE SATURDAY MORNING AND GRUEN AND GOLDRICH (ALONG WITH DCM) WERE INVITED TO HAVE LUNCH AT SYRIAN/JEWISH HOME. ON THIS OCCASION, UNLIKE PAST COMMUNITY CONTACTS WITH CONGRESSMEN WAXMAN AND SOLARZ, NO SYRIAN OFFIALS OR SECURITY REPRESENTATIVES WERE PRESENT. SEVEN MEMBERS OF JEWISH COMMUNITY ATTENDED DCM'S RECEPTION EVENING FEB 12 AT WHICH EMBASSY MADE CONTRIBUTION TOWARD

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ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN SYRIA BY INTRODUCING JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADER

TO GREEK CATHOLIC PATRIARCH. THOUGH BOTH INHABIT OLD CITY IN DAMASCUS, THEY HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY MET. ADDITIONALLY, RABBI GOLDRICH HAD SEVERAL IMPROMPTU DISCUSSIONS WITH SYRIAN JEWISH MERCHANTS ALONG STREET-CALLED-STRAIGHT DURING WHICH INTERLOUCUTORS WERE ALARMED BY HIS INDISCREET BEHAVIOR (E.G., PULLING OUT NOTEBOOK AND MAKING NOTES IN STREET OUTSIDE SHOPS), BUT THERE WERE NO NOTICEABLE REAMIFICATIONS SO FAR AS WE AWARE. COMMUNITY, TO SUMMARIZE, WELCOMED GROUP'S VISIT AND WE BELIEVED CONVEYED IMPRESSION THAT LIFE WAS EASIER, THAT SARG ATTITUDE WAS EVOLVING IN RIGHT DIRECTION BUT BY NO MEANS WAS THEIR TREATMENT AS YET FULLY ON A PAR WITH SYRIANS GENERALLY. CONTINUED IDENTIFICATION OF RELIGION ON SOME ID CARDS, PROBLEM OF UNMARRIED WOMEN, AND CONTINUING PASSPORT RESTRICTIONS WERE PRINCIPAL POINTS RAISED.

4. COMMENT: VISIT OF THIS INTERESTED AND ARTICULATE CHRISTIAN/JEWISH GROUP WAS WARMLY WELCOMED BY SYRIANS AND HOPE WAS FREQUENTLY HEARD EXPRESSED THAT OTHER SIMILAR GROUPS WOULD VISIT IN FUTURE. GRUEN AS GROUP LEADER, HANDLED SENSITIVE PROTIONS OF VISIT WITH TACT, UNDERSTANDING, FIRMNESS AND GOOD HUMOR. HE REALIZES GROUP WILL PROBABLY BE EXPOSED TO INTENSIVE QUESTIONING WHEN IT REACHES ISRAEL REGARDING BOTH CONDITIONS OF SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AND FACT THAT IT HAD CONTACT WITH PLO REPS IN DAMASCUS.

MURPHY

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